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Soviets Teach Carter a Painful Lesson

On New Year's Eve, an abashed President Carter admitted to ABC-TV that he had been taken in by the Soviets, that Kremlin czar Leonid I. Brezhnev had lied to him. "My opinion of the Russians has changed more drastically in the last week," he said, "than even the previous 2½ years."

This is the story of the education of Carter, taken from top-secret documents and personal accounts.

He eagerly sought a face-to-face meeting with his Soviet counterpart. Once alone with Brezhnev, the president believed his own Christian good will would prevail. He hoped to appeal to the man's better instincts; then together they would move the incendiaries from the powder kegs.

In an exchange of private letters with the Sovet leader, Carter expressed his desire in early 1977 for a summit meeting to advance detente. But Carter was continually put off. The Kremlin tried to use his eagerness for a summit meeting as a negotiating point, seeking concessions in return.

Undeterred, the president reported to his Cabinet Nov. 21, 1977, that he was "attempting to cooperate with the Soviets on a number of fronts." Carter said he had appealed to Brezhnev to use moderation in dealing with the Middle East. He told the Cabinet, according to the secret minutes, that his appeal had "some effect."

As an example of this "moderation," Brezhnev delivered a stockpile of military hardware to Ethiopia, including jet fighters, tanks and artillery. Then he flew in Cuban troops to man the equipment.

After the Ethiopian caper, the president ruefully acknowledged to the Cabinet that the Soviet-American relationship "was not as good as it should be." His national security affairs adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, briefed the Cabinet on what he called "a pattern of deterioration."

But Carter didn't let the subjugation of Ethiopia dampen his enthusiasm for dentente. He assured the Cabinet March 6, 1978, that he would not link an arms settlement "to the Soviet presence in the African horn." He reported happily that "progress was being made" in the strategic arms limitation negotiations and that he expected to resolve "the last three or four issues" personally with Brezhnev.

Scarcely four months later, Brezhnev delivered a humiliating slap in Carter's face. The president made a personal, private appeal to the Soviets to release the celebrated Jewish dissident Anatoly Shcharansky, who had been accused of spying or the United States.

Carter checked with CIA chief Stansfield Turner and satisfied himself that Shchcharansky had never been connected in any way with the CIA. So Carter went public with a statement that the Jewish dissident had never been an American spy. The Soviets found Scharansky guilty anyway, thus proclaiming the president a liar. This was a personal affront to Carter, who petulantly cut off some computer shipments to the Soviet Union.

But he would not abandon his faith in detente. He was determined to sit down with Brezhnev and find a way to avoid Armageddon. In December 1978, he asked his top aide, Hamilton Jordan, to form a White House task force that would sell SALT II to the nation even before it was signed.

Just as Jordan began a massive campaign to convince Americans of the Kremlin's peaceful inclinations, the unruly Soviets directed their Cuban mercenaries to go on the offensive in Yemen.

At the same time, the Soviets gave their full backing to a Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. Carter's reaction was presented to the Cabinet Jan. 15, 1979: "The U.S. position is *not* to take sides between the Soviet and [Chinese] positions, to use diplomatic means to express our displeasure over the invasion and to seek Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia."

On Feb. 5, 1979, the president stressed to his Cabinet that his first priority was still to reach an accommodation with the Soviets. The secret minutes quote him as saying: "Sino-American relations will have long-term consequences of great importance, but there will be no more important near-term debate than on SALT."

The Kremlin continued a military build-up that alarmed Brzezinski. In a secret "Comprehensive Net Assessment" of the American-Soviet balance, he warned the president that the tide was running strongly in favor of the Soviets.

But Carter never lost his faith that he could overcome the barriers to detente—not, that is, until the aggression in Afghanistan rudely changed his mind about the Soviets.